

The Buttolph Collection

A Curator's Reference

An open reference on the largest single archive of historic printed menus — The New York Public Library's Buttolph Collection, 1851–1930.

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The Buttolph Collection of Menus

The Buttolph Collection of Menus, held at The New York Public Library, is the largest single archive of historic printed menus in the world. It contains approximately 25,000 cards spanning the period roughly 1851 to 1930, with the densest holdings in the years between 1895 and 1920. The collection was built single-handedly between 1899 and 1924 by a New York Public Library cataloguer named Frances E. Buttolph, who signed her correspondence "F. E. Buttolph" and was routinely addressed as "Mr." by the restaurants, hotels, ocean liners, clubs, and railroad dining companies to whom she wrote — a routine misreading she did not correct, since it made her requests more likely to be answered.

Buttolph had no academic credentials and at the start of her project no salary for it. She proposed the collection to the New York Public Library in 1899, persuaded the Library to host what she gathered, and then spent the next twenty-five years writing letters to every restaurant, hotel, ocean liner, dining club, railroad dining company, ladies' society, and steamship line she could identify, asking each to send her a copy of every printed menu they used.

The cooperation rate was extraordinarily high. The major Atlantic shipping lines — Cunard, White Star, Norddeutscher Lloyd, Hamburg-Amerika, Compagnie Générale Transatlantique — sent regular shipments. So did the great New York hotels (the Waldorf-Astoria, the Plaza), the Pullman dining-car services, the New England summer-resort hotels, and a remarkable long tail of one-off banquets at fraternal lodges, college reunions, and society weddings whose menus would otherwise have survived in nothing more durable than a guest's coat pocket.

Why the Buttolph Collection Survived

The Library understood the archive's reference value early. By 1925 it was already lending the Buttolph material to food historians, hotel-industry researchers, and the early generation of decorative-arts scholars. The collection was used, which meant it was protected. It was not put into a basement and forgotten. In 2010 the Library digitised the entire collection at high resolution and released the originals into the public domain in the United States, where they remain. The digital images are searchable; the underlying physical material is housed in the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building on Fifth Avenue.

What the Archive Captures That Others Miss

Three things, specifically. First, it preserves the *middle* of menus, not just the decorative covers. Most surviving menus in private collections are valued for cover art; the interior — the actual food, in two columns, in two languages — is often lost or torn. Buttolph filed her holdings intact. Second, it captures the *ordinary*, not just the elaborate keepsake cards. The roughly cut working dining-room copies of Tuesday lunch menus survive here alongside the gilded captain's dinner programmes. Third, it spans *all* classes of dining — first-class saloon, second-class dining, third-class buffet, even some pre-1910 steerage cards — not only the photogenic first-class material.

Composition of the Holdings

Six broad categories account for most of the material. Ocean-liner and steamship menus comprise roughly thirty percent. Hotel banquets and restaurant menus account for about twenty-five percent. Railroad and dining-car cards make up ten percent. Society and private-event menus (weddings, fraternal banquets, alumni reunions, civic dinners) account for roughly fifteen percent. Royal, state, and naval menus, including from H.M.Y. Victoria and Albert and the U.S.S. Maine, make up about five percent. The remaining fifteen percent covers cafes, clubs, women's organisations, and a long tail of miscellaneous print culture.

A Note on This Reference

The selected 52 menus described in the companion document, *Curator's Notes on Fifty-Two Selected Menus*, were drawn from the Buttolph holdings on the basis of visual strength, period coverage, and printability at modern decorative sizes. The selection deliberately weights toward the ocean-liner watercolour and Art Deco material from the 1897–1928 period, which represents the strongest single design body of work in the archive. The companion document provides per-card historical context for each.

Further Reference

For substantive editorial work on the Buttolph archive, the major shipping-line menu programmes, and the wider 1880–1930 transatlantic dining design history, see themenupress.com. For the structured open metadata of the 52 selected menus (CSV and JSON, CC-BY-4.0), see github.com/themenupress/buttolph-menu-metadata.

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